WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT UNIT 13B (34)-DOLORES TRIANGLE

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Grand County - Boundary begins at the Colorado River and Utah-Colorado state line; then southwest along the Colorado River to the Dolores River; east along the Dolores River to the state line; north along the state line to the Colorado River and beginning point.

Herd Unit Description

The Dolores Triangle unit is formed by the Colorado River, the Dolores River, and the Colorado-Utah state line. Topography is varied with relatively flat mesas above 7,000 feet, large rocky rough canyons and broken country at the middle elevations, with low desert along the Colorado River. Four drainages dominate the area. Granite Creek flows into the Dolores River; Ryan Creek, Coates Creek, and Little Dolores River empty into the Colorado River. There are ranches scattered throughout the area, while Fruita and Grand Junction, Colorado are the closest municipalities. Access to the unit is through Colorado by way of Glade Park or by fording the Dolores River near its confluence with the Colorado River at Dewey. However, fluctuating water levels and undeleting bottom contours make crossing hazardous. The unit is comprised of 94,100 acres of winter range and 17,520 acres are classified as non-range. There isn't any habitat within this unit that would be classified as "real" summer range. The Bureau of Land Management manages 88% (82,900 acres) of the herd unit. The State of Utah owns 9% (8,600 acres) of the winter range and 3% (2,600 acres) is privately owned.

The Dolores Triangle unit serves as winter range for deer which spend the remainder of the year in Colorado's Pinon Mesa area. Few deer reside in the unit year-round, the few that do are found along the Colorado River. Concentration areas for deer during normal winters are Steamboat Mesa, Lower Steamboat Mesa, Fish Park, Big Triangle, Ryan Park. and Granite Park. Only during severe winters with abnormally heavy snowfall are deer forced to disperse into the lower desert range where forage quality is poor. Severe winter range and normal winter range are not separated into different categories because much of the land to the east is too high for normal winter range. Therefore, the whole unit could be considered critical. The many scattered ranches with agricultural land throughout the herd unit offer valuable forage to the deer in the spring and fall.

Coles and Pederson (1968) identified and described five vegetation types which make up the winter range on the unit. The desert shrub type is dominated by blackbrush which occupies the lower portions of this winter range. This type is most important during severe winters although few desirable forage species are found within this type. The grass type is found in the Granite Park and Steamboat Mesa areas. These were once large sagebrush parks, but have undergone a conversion to grasses (much of it cheatgrass) with overgrazing during the wrong time of the year (fall and/or spring), wildfires (reoccurring more often with the increase in weedy species), and sagebrush treatments. Formerly, these areas were important deer wintering areas which now receive increasing use by elk. The sagebrush type is found above the desert shrub and up to and within the pinyon-juniper woodlands. It provides important browse to both deer and livestock. The pinyon-juniper type, like the grass type, has undergone some changes due to competition with the mature trees, extended drought, and with some past years of heavy use. An understory of cliffrose and black sagebrush has diminished somewhat through the years and is the least productive vegetative type on the unit. The pinyon-juniper type is common on the slopes and higher mesas. The pinyon-juniper-sagebrush type occupies the upper portions of the winter range and provides important cover and forage for wildlife. In the past few years many wildfires have burned large acreages of this type.

Livestock Grazing

Livestock grazing is the single-most important land use in the area. Winter sheep use began in the early 1900's. Now, most of the AUM's (about 7,500) the BLM allocates for livestock use is for cattle, although some winter sheep use still occurs. Pinyon-juniper's evolving dominance along with excessive use by livestock and big game have led to deteriorating range conditions. Both livestock and deer numbers were reduced in the past to help improve the range. Although some problems still exist, range conditions appear to be slowly improving according to Jense et al. 1986. However with mostly drouth conditions since then, those conditions have deteriorated, especially at the lower elevations.

This unit presents some unique deer and elk management problems. Since this unit functions primarily as winter range for big game which spend the remainder of the year in Colorado, any effective management requires coordinated efforts with Colorado's Department of Game and Fish. Also, since deer and elk are present mostly in the winter when snow depth may complicate access to the area, obtaining population data is often difficult. Because the presence of deer and elk depends on weather conditions prior to and during the hunt, hunting as a management tool is not always effective. If heavy snows have driven the deer onto the unit, hunter access is usually a problem. Thus, the number of deer harvested and percent hunter success is often more related to weather conditions than to deer abundance.

Big Game Trends

Beginning in 1969, the deer herd unit showed a significant drop in bucks harvested. Between 1969 and 1975, either-sex general season and control hunts accounted for an average yearly harvest of 403 bucks and 207 does. Previously, from 1955 through 1968, the buck harvest averaged near 1,500 bucks/year. Under buck only hunting regulations between 1976 and 1985, the average harvest was 89 bucks/year. In 1983, control hunts for does were implemented and have accounted for an average of 122 does/year through 1990. Antlerless permits have not been utilized since 1990. The buck harvest dropped again in 1987 and in 1990 the herd unit was made a draw unit with 26-27 hunters afield and an average of 22 bucks/year harvested through 1995. Current management objectives are a harvest of 100 bucks/year with an antlerless harvest as needed.

Elk that winter in this area come from Colorado's unit 40, which is managed for quality hunting. There have been minimal numbers of elk harvested by Utah hunters in this unit. Basically, Colorado would like to gradually increase these elk numbers from an estimated 1,700 animals now to 3,000 animals sometime in the distant future. About 50% of the elk population use Utah as winter range and are expected to continue to do so. The current management objectives are to maintain an optimum elk herd population, while not degrading the health of the range and hopefully complement Colorado's management goals.

Trend Study Description

Nine interagency range trend studies were established during June 1986. The study sites were selected the previous month by local interagency personnel. The studies were read again in May of 1995, and 2000.

SUMMARY

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Four of the 9 studies located in the Dolores Triangle unit sample pinyon-juniper chainings completed in 1968. The chaining sites include Fish Park (#3), Ryan Park (#6), Steamboat Mesa North (#7), and Steamboat East Bench (#9). Another four sites are considered sagebrush/grass sites. These sites include Lower Westwater (#1), Upper Westwater (#2), Buckhorn Draw (#5), and Steamboat Mesa South (#8). The final site, Red Cliffs (#4), is classified as a blackbrush site. The following table summarizes trends for all sites for all years. Detailed information with regard to site trends is written up in each site narrative. The exceptionally dry year has greatly reduced the dominance of cheatgrass and decreased the amount of forbs throughout this unit.

TREND SUMMARY

Site No. and Name	Category	1986	1995	2000
13B-1 Lower Westwater	soil	est	3	2
	browse	est	1	1
	herbaceous understory	est	1	1
13B-2 Upper Westwater	soil	est	3	1
	browse	est	1	1
	herbaceous understory	est	1	1
13B-3 Fish Park	soil	est	3	3
	browse	est	5	3
	herbaceous understory	est	2	3
13B-4 Red Cliffs	soil	est	3	3
	browse	est	3	3
	herbaceous understory	est	2	3
13B-5 Buckhorn Draw	soil	est	3	2
	browse	est	4	3
	herbaceous understory	est	3	3
13B-6 Ryan Creek	soil	est	3	2
	browse	est	1	3
	herbaceous understory	est	1	3
13B-7 Steamboat Mesa North	soil	est	3	3
	browse	est	3	3
	herbaceous understory	est	4	4

est = established, 1 = down, 2 = slightly down, 3 = stable, 4 = slightly up, 5 = up

Site No. and Name	Category	1986	1995	2000
13B-8 Steamboat Mesa South	soil	est	3	2
	browse	est	3	3
	herbaceous understory	est	1	4
13B-9 Steamboat Mesa East Bench	soil	est	3	3
	browse	est	3	2
	herbaceous understory	est	3	3

est = established, 1 = down, 2 = slightly down, 3 = stable, 4 = slightly up, 5 = up